

WRITTEN TESTIMONY OF MAXINE THOME, PhD, LMSW, ACSW, MPH  
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF THE NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF SOCIAL WORKERS  
- MICHIGAN CHAPTER

MICHIGAN HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES, JUDICIARY COMMITTEE  
REPRESENTATIVE MARK MEADOWS, CHAIRMAN

December 14, 2009

Thank you to the members of this subcommittee, Representatives Bob Constan and Justin Amash and Chairman Meadows for your leadership on the issue of public defense reform. On behalf of the National Association of Social Workers - Michigan chapter (NASW-MI), I am grateful for the opportunity to present this testimony on an issue many social workers in Michigan care about passionately.

My name is Maxine Thome, and I am the Executive Director of the National Association of Social Workers - Michigan (NASW-MI). The mission of our organization is to support, promote, and advocate for the social work profession and licensed social workers and for sound public policy to improve the quality of life for the people of Michigan.

NASW is the oldest and largest organization of professional social workers with 153,000 members nationwide, of which more than 7,500 are in Michigan. Michigan's licensed social workers practice in many settings including public and private agencies, community mental health centers, schools, hospitals, businesses, state government, and the military. Licensed social workers provide more than half of the nation's mental health services and offer other vital services to individuals, families and communities.

People in Michigan are becoming more and more concerned every day about the ballooning costs of the State's corrections system. Refining Michigan's public defense system is one important way we can begin to work to improve cost efficiencies in our state budget. The quality of defense that an individual receives initially can have a drastic effect on the ultimate costs of our judicial system that Michigan taxpayers are now paying. Our current system is fraught with unnecessarily long sentences, costly

appeals, wrongful conviction lawsuits, and other mistakes that contribute significantly to our skyrocketing corrections costs and societal ills.

In an effective public defense system, public defense attorneys, working in tandem with licensed social workers, would play a crucial role in ensuring that individuals can be restored to meaningful crime-free lives in society, thus reducing recidivism. Individuals with mental health or substance abuse problems would be diverted to treatment programs that work instead of years in prison.

NASW-MI hopes for an effective public defense system. Social workers and defense attorneys together can work to provide necessary and important services that will, in the long run, ensure a system that is much more effective and cost efficient. Our current public defense delivery system, however, does not even equip attorneys with the necessary tools. For example, because of unmanageable caseloads, attorneys sometimes meet their clients for just a few minutes before court hearings. Because of a lack of funding for experts or investigators and a lack of training requirements, attorneys often do not have the resources to properly handle a case.

Placing more social workers in public defender offices throughout the state would lead to a speedier and more efficient integration of services for individuals needing public defense assistance. Social workers are uniquely trained and educated in social justice issues and can advise public defense attorneys on client-specific treatment plans, diversion programs, and other recommendations for alternatives to incarceration.

The National Association of Social Workers – Michigan Chapter embraces a code of ethics that social workers will promote institutions that are “compatible with the realization of social justice.” With that ethic in mind, we support your efforts to reform Michigan’s public defense system and ask that you keep the focus of this legislation on establishing a statewide system of public defense, supported by state funding and based on standards applied in states throughout our country.

NASW-MI is committed to working towards a public defense system that works.

Thank you sincerely for the opportunity to provide this testimony.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Madeline Thomas". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Madeline" written in a larger, more prominent script than the last name "Thomas".